

The widow who redefined generosity

Stewardship Sunday worship resources



Two coins were dropped in the offering thousands of years ago. This small gift continues to deeply challenge our generosity practices today.

The story of the widow, who gave her all, two coins, is central to the new Everence® Stewardship Sunday worship resources for your congregation in 2018. January is a good time for a Stewardship Sunday. Whether you choose to observe it this month or later in the year, I encourage you to focus on stewardship early in 2018.

Clif Christopher in his book, *Not your Parents' Offering Plate*, has suggested that given the prominence of topics like money, possessions and generosity in scripture, pastors should address this topic at least four times per year. One of those times ideally should be in January – a time of new beginning!

Resources

To help you with this goal, Everence is pleased to offer resources to assist you in your planning of Stewardship Sunday around *The widow who redefined generosity*:

- **Worship and sermon outline** (below)
- **In-depth curriculum:** This outline was taken in part from a free downloadable longer curriculum, *But It's Only a Story: Why Jesus told stories about money and why we should too*. Check out more in this series at everence.com/resources-for-adults.
- **PowerPoint slide and bulletin insert:** Both can be found in the sermons and worship resources section at everence.com/pastors-church-leaders.

Blessings on your stewardship ministry this year!

– Beryl Jantzi, Everence Director of Stewardship Education



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Worship service outline

Following is an order of worship, along with sermon ideas and outline based on the story of the widow's offering, from Mark 12:41-44. You can pick and choose from these ideas and adapt what is here to fit your context and the needs of your congregation.

Call to worship

God of great wonders, we join with you this Sunday and as we begin this new year. You gave us a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. You give us life and breath, you fill the world with beauty, our hands with bounty, and our hearts with joy.

We gather now to worship you and celebrate the gift of community and being church together. Amen.

Children's story

Read Mark 12: 41-44 and briefly explain the story of the widow, emphasizing the idea of giving what you have, even if you don't have a lot to give.

Prepare to have two coins for each child. Give them these after they listen to the story. Explain that they will have the opportunity to give during the offering. Ask them to consider what they just heard about the widow when they are deciding how much they should give.

Scripture reading: Mark 12: 41-44

Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents.

Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything – all she had to live on."

Sermon outline

In this week's Gospel story, Jesus observes people making financial contributions as they enter the temple. He calls his disciples to him and points out that a poor widow has contributed all she has to the offering. He uses her as an example of someone who makes a true sacrifice to God.

Following are themes from this text that you can adapt, expand and make your own. There are also quotations throughout the notes that you may want to add to your sermon as it seems appropriate.

Background

It is often difficult to consider how different the life of a widow in Jesus' time was from most widows today. There was no financial safety net of Social Security, Medicare, food stamps or heating assistance, and no church agencies to help.

There was no pension system for widows, built up over years of work or a pension from a deceased husband. Widows were absolutely at the mercy of their sons, if they had sons, and older community members. It is possible that there were certain levels of assistance made available from a temple widows fund of that day, but those amounts would have been quite limited, given all of the needs that would have been present.

This story about the widow making an offering in the Temple is related to the previous passage (Mark 12:38-40) in which Jesus condemns those scribes who exploit widows. Whereas the scribes (leaders in the temple) were criticized, this widow is praised.

God's economics

We see that Jesus has a way of turning everything in his world on its head to explain God's perspective. We see that God's economics are drastically different from those of the culture at-large.

In this scripture, we are told that God looks at what we give compared to what we actually have. Yet, in Jesus' time, as in our own, many of us look at the size of the contribution alone. Jesus seems to be asking us to rethink our definition of generosity.

I'll do what you want me to do, dear Lord, I yearn for your kingdom to thrive; I'll give you my nickels and dimes, dear Lord, But please don't ask me to tithe.

– Author Unknown

Surplus vs. sacrifice

We are told that rich people made a great show of giving large amounts while this woman gives only a tiny sum of money – all she has, probably. Who has given more?

Jesus argues that the widow has given the most because while the rich have only given from their surplus, and thus have not sacrificed anything to God, the widow has indeed sacrificed greatly. She has given “all she had to live on,” suggesting that she may now not have money for food.

Earn as much as you can. Save as much as you can. Invest as much as you can. Give as much as you can. – John Wesley

Purpose of the passage

The purpose of the passage may be to explain what “true” obedience as understood by Jesus was: being willing to give everything you have for the sake of God. Those who merely contribute from their surplus aren't sacrificing anything, and therefore their contributions will not be considered as a significant gesture by God.

This story parallels the coming passages in which Jesus is anointed by the woman who gives all she has, and it is similar to the descriptions of discipleship of other women later in the book of Mark.

I have held many things in my hand, and have lost them all; but whatever I have placed in God's hands, that I still possess. – Martin Luther

What motivates you to give?

What do you think motivated this woman to give as she did? What motivates you to give? Dr. Kennon Callahan has been a highly regarded consultant to churches for decades. He specializes in the area of stewardship and church finances. In his book, *Giving and Stewardship in an Effective Church* (Jossey-Bass, 1997), Callahan identifies compassion, community, challenge and commitment as the four main catalysts for giving. Too often, congregations try to instill the importance of giving in a Christian's life by appealing to challenge and commitment. That, unfortunately, is not as effective as drawing on the values of compassion and community.

Perhaps the widow gave because she knew other widows who did not have even one coin. It was also the result of an instruction she received that, in giving to God, we recognize that ultimately God provides for our needs, and God can be trusted to meet our needs.

Where did this woman learn to give? For most of us, giving from our excess is one thing but sacrificial giving is something else entirely. Did her parents model this kind of trust in God to provide? Did it come from the spiritual leaders of her community? That seems difficult to believe, given how harsh Jesus is on the leaders of the temple.

Before you speak, listen. Before you write, think. Before you spend, earn. Before you invest, investigate. Before you criticize, wait. Before you pray, forgive. Before you quit, try. Before you retire, save. Before you die, give. – William A. Ward

Depicting the widow

I recently saw an artist's depiction of the Mark 12 widow's mite story. He depicted the widow as a young woman carrying a child on her hip. Scripture doesn't say if the widow was young or old.

For some reason, we assume she is an older woman, but scripture doesn't mention her age or stage of life. How does this change the meaning of the story if it were a young widow with children?

Modern-day widow

A personal illustration of my own to help you think of what you may be able to share from your experience: I recently visited with a group of pastors. I heard a story from a pastor who serves in a congregation predominantly made up of Native Americans.

A single grandmother who is the sole breadwinner for the family cares for her daughter and two grandchildren, along with a several other family members who will come and be part of her home from time to time. She expresses the very spirit of generosity in spite of living with very limited financial resources.

This congregation has a practice in which members bring their offering forward each Sunday. One Sunday morning, the pastor stood with a basket, receiving the gifts of the people, when the woman came up to him with a smile on her face and a \$100 bill in her hand. She whispers to the pastor that she found the bill in her Bible and didn't know where it had come from, but decided that she was to give it in the offering that morning.

As the pastor told the story, he was still emotional even though this had occurred sometime in the past. He knew very well her needs and that she lived on barely enough to survive as it was. The woman's ability to offer this money as a gift to God was true to all the other expressions of generosity she lived every day among her family, friends and church community.

Proportionate to what? Proportionate to the accumulated wealth of one's family? Proportionate to one's income and the demands upon it, which vary from family to family? Proportionate to one's sense of security and the degree of anxiety with which one lives? Proportionate to the keenness of our awareness of those who suffer? Proportionate to our sense of justice and of God's ownership of all wealth? Proportionate to our sense of stewardship for those who follow after us? And so on, and so forth. The answer of course, is in proportion to all of these things. – Elizabeth O' Connor

Offering prayer

Leader: O Lord, you graciously pour out your blessings on us. Your gifts surround us.

Congregation: Open our minds and our hearts to learn from the widow's gift.

All: All we have is a gift from your hand. Help us loosen our hands, giving to work of this church on your behalf, for in giving freely to you, we gain the opportunity to live abundant lives!

Sending blessing

L: For all the ways you love us, we say,

C: Thank you!

L: For the ways you provide for us, we say,

C: Thank you!

L: For the opportunity to give, we say,

C: Thank you!

L: For letting us be a part of your work, we say,

C: Thank you!

L: Might the lives we live as we begin this new week express generosity and gratitude and draw others to you.



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